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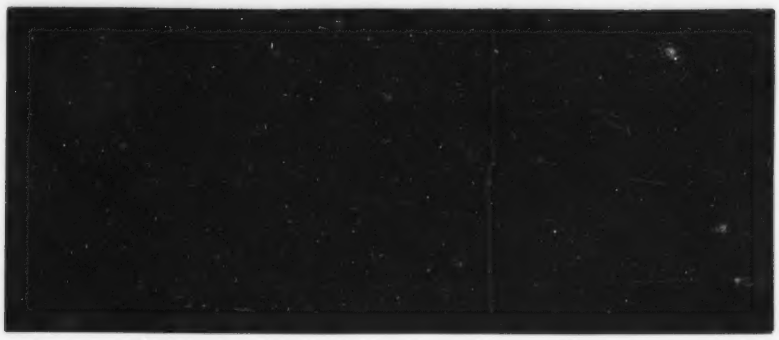

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ROUNDTABLE ON BURMA

May 27, 1999
Ottawa

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On May 27, 1999, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organised a roundtable on Burma in Ottawa. The main objectives of the roundtable were to continue the evolution and thinking about Canadian foreign policy towards Burma (including a continued discussion from the 1997 Vancouver roundtable); to share past experience and the expertise of the diverse participants, including NGOs, government officials, academics, church and labour representatives, as well as Burmese students; and to test new ideas and approaches. The following is a summary of the discussion.

I. The Political and Socio-Economic Background in Burma -- Some Canadian Assessments

The current situation in Burma and the general direction of Canadian foreign policy was described by the **Honourable Raymond Chan**, M.P., Secretary of State, Asia-Pacific, who pointed out that besides North Korea, Burma is one of the most difficult countries to work with and to influence. While one may see movement towards democracy even in Communist China, it has become increasingly difficult to "crack the shell" in Burma. Minister Chan emphasised that the situation is getting worse. This development poses difficulties for policy makers in Canada. Despite the fact that Minister Axworthy toughened up Canada's stand toward Burma two years ago, there has been no positive development there.

Minister Chan then invited the roundtable to generate thoughts and new ideas to help make headway in Burma.

The Canada's Ambassador in Bangkok, **Bernard Giroux**, shared his experience from working in Burma. After a prolonged period of waiting for accreditation to Burma, he began to travel around the country to establish contacts and learn more about the general situation. His assessment was rather bleak. He said that there has not been a change in four years despite measures implemented by the international community. In 1998, the situation worsened when detentions and imprisonment increased. There is no political will from the government to negotiate. Perhaps the only positive signs detectable are the verbal agreement to let the International Red Cross Committee to return and to allow the visit of a UN Commission. Another escalating problem the Ambassador addressed was the high Burmese drug production and trade, which saw a very slight decrease in 1998.

Burma has been hit by the Asian crisis as much as any other country in the region. While

the rice stock situation is unclear, there have been power cut-offs since the government does not have enough resources to buy oil and lack of rain makes the use of hydro power impossible. Economic hardship might be the catalyst to change.

Some hopes for democratisation were put into Burma's recent joining of ASEAN. It was anticipated that the accession of Burma to ASEAN would lead to some improvement for civil society through a new forum for discussion. However, no progress has been made through this channel either as most of the ASEAN members are wary of upsetting the delicate balance in the region.

The outlook presented by the Ambassador was overall fairly negative, but the efforts at democratisation must not stop. Attempts should be made to get through to the leadership. Signs of some movement have been apparent as senior officials are willing now at least to have discussions.

Canada's influence is circumscribed because trade with Burma is quite minimal (i.e., imposition of unilateral sanctions does not have much impact) and influencing the Burmese government from Canadian values is very difficult. In this context, he asked, what measures and options are there for Canada?

The last speaker was **James Myint Swe**, the Director of the National Coalition of the Union of Burma. He thanked the Canadian government for its consistent support of democracy in Burma (i.e., financial support through the ICHRDD and Minister Axworthy's empathy) as well as Canadian NGOs for their work with the Burmese people and in promoting a sound Canadian foreign policy. He also expressed his appreciation to the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development for helping with a continuing discussion.

Myint Swe described the current situation in Burma to be at a critical point. The brutal military dictatorship – the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (which recently cosmetically replaced the State Law and Order Restoration Council, SLORC) and an elected democratic opposition – the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) together with pro-democratic elements represented by the National League for Democracy (NLD), now struggle for control over the future of the country with a backdrop of ethnic divisions. These ethnic divisions could explode if the political and economic situation in Burma gets out of control. It is, therefore, imperative that the NDL's policy of promoting settlement through peaceful dialogue prove successful.

Myint Swe argued that the power relationship between the SPDC and the NDL can be conceptualised as a vertical interdependent relationship. Activities that increase the power of the NDL *vis a vis* the SPDC include actions that affect the regime's ability to govern (i.e., income threatening activities such as sanctions and boycotts and activities threatening the viability of the security apparatus such as demonstrations and arrests or release of political prisoners). Conversely the power of the SPDC *vis a vis* NDL is increased by greater income, marginalisation of the political opposition, and legitimacy in the international community.

The NDL's power waned since 1990 when the pro-democracy mood in the country was strengthened by the elections. Demonstrations and civil disobedience were rampant. However, following an electoral success, the NLD's members were arrested and the movement weakened. Some minimal mobilisation of the movement for democracy is visible now, in response to Daw

Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches. The government has been able to reinvigorate its grip on society through opening the economy and financing a massive military build-up from realised profits. However, the end of the business boom in 1997 and the Asian currency crisis may yet bode for potential divisions among the military elites. Therefore, it appears that the relative power of both sides is about equal and may constitute a basis for a breakthrough. The importance of a dialogue and negotiation has never been greater.

While the NDL is ready to negotiate, it does not appear that the regime will approach the table unless forced.

In light of this picture, Myint Swe urged Canada to:

1. **Recognise the Committee Representing the Peoples Parliament (CRPP)** (formed by the NLD on 16th of September, 1998) as the sole representative body of Burma. (The CRPP has been recognised by the Nordic countries and the British Columbia provincial government). This support is important because first, it is due and second, it would delegitimise and subsequently weaken the repressive regime
2. **Employ economic sanctions against Burma** since they would not be particularly harmful to the people as investment mostly enriches an already wealthy group of elite with close ties to the military. "Profit must not be placed before principle."
3. **Use coercive diplomacy to bring the junta to the dialogue table either through the traditional "carrot and stick" diplomacy or through the UN and other multilateral mechanisms.** In the context of Canada's membership at the UN Security Council Canada could:
   - propose a general agenda to discuss a possible UN-sponsored negotiation (as well as at the coming UN General Assembly or through an informal consultative body);
   - make the UNDP humanitarian aid system conditional on NLD's participation as a means to bringing the parties together;
   - introduce a programme on Burma at the monthly briefing of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

   Furthermore, Canada could use its active membership in APEC and its status as a friendly nation to ASEAN as means to encourage dialogue in Burma.
4. **Take a more active stance against the repression of the NLD**

In conclusion, Myint Swe said that despite what seems to be a political gridlock, the conditions in Burma are ripe for change. He reiterated Aung San Suu Kyi's recent call to the international community: "More than words, we need concrete action."

II Synopsis of the Discussions

The discussions fell into two broad categories:

1. Thoughts on the general political and socio-economic situation in Burma
2. Canada's "diplomatic," "development," and NGO initiatives/policies

1. Thoughts on the General Political and Socio-economic Situation in Burma

Professor Bruce Mattews from Acadia University noted that through his connections to the Church and academia he has ascertained that the SPDC is actually more dangerous than its predecessor the SLORC because it comprises young men who are being trained by the older guard. This younger government may prove even more obdurate than the previous one. Although some clique formation in the government is detectable, discipline remains strong. At the same time, there seems to be some fragmentation in the NLD ranks. Given this political climate we should not expect the Burmese people to be able to do much for democracy from inside of Burma. The political basis for an uprising is minimal at this stage.

Myint Swe countered Prof. Matthew's claim that the NLD is experiencing problems and argued that the splintering of the democratic movement is very minimal.

Micheline Levesque, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, offered her views from travelling in Burma. She participated at some meetings organised by the democratic movement and listened to Suu Kyi's speeches. She talked about peoples' participation in these meetings and their involvement by written notes with questions addressed to Suu Kyi, to which she would respond. Her comments were a rare sign of optimism for democratisation in Burma. Others gave their impressions about the growing restlessness of the Burmese people and a shift in attitude from caution to a more explicit expression of discontent. These contributions led some to believe that the Burmese people have reached the tolerable limit and Burma is on a threshold of change

Though sceptical about politics as the engine of change, Prof. Matthews argued that the deterioration of the economic situation compounded by an agrarian emergency, just may be the catalyst for change. Rice stocks are very low and shortages of cooking oil and fuel oil seem to be intensifying. Moreover, others pointed out that deflation brought about by the Asian crisis makes the import of cooking oil from Malaysia -- Burma's main supplier of oil, too expensive. Dr. Win Myint Than added that during her last visit of Burma she noticed, to her great surprise, people selling rice water for nourishment.

Gary Rozema from the Burma Relief Centre pointed out that since the government is continuing to export rice, the shortage might not be as profound as Prof. Matthews suggested. From his own experience, a significant insecurity facing the Burmese people, besides food shortages, is the sale and leasing of land to foreign corporations.

Micheline Levesque, said that the physical infrastructure is only getting worse. Others added that social infrastructure is almost non-existent. There are few hospitals and few doctors, while the quality of medical care is very limited. People must often take great risks and cross borders to receive treatment. Meanwhile, according to Ingrid Hall, Director General, South and Southeast Asia Bureau, DFAIT, the civil service has been downsized to become a mere ghost of its former self. This lack of infrastructure poses serious problems for the maintenance of a modern state.

Once sustainability becomes threatened by the lack of core staples and the physical and social infrastructure collapses, upheaval is likely.

ii Canada's "Diplomatic," "Developmental," and NGO Initiatives/Policies

The discussion surrounding Canada's "diplomatic" initiatives was started by Peter Gillespie from Inter Pares who drew attention to a paper distributed at the roundtable, produced by the Friends of Burma, and entitled *Canadian NGO Policy Paper on Burma* (a copy for those who did not attend the meeting is included in this package). The paper lists the following ten policy recommendations for the government's considerations (some of them overlap with Myint Swe's list):

1. Canada should **introduce the subject of Burma as a general discussion agenda item at the UN Security Council.**
2. Canada should **initiate a discussion about the humanitarian crisis in Burma with the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.**
3. Canada should **request the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to convene a UN inter-agency meeting to consider the crisis in Burma**
4. Canada should **seek to formalize the existing Burma informal consultative mechanism of the UN Secretary General** and promote it as a forum of the coordination if international policy and strategy
5. The Minister should proceed to impose **investment sanctions** under the Special Economic Measures Act. If the Minister determines that he cannot proceed under SEMA, he should enact a special statute tailored to the particular situation of Burma.
6. The Canadian Government should amend the **Income Tax Act** to bar Canadian companies operating in Burma from deducting any of their foreign business income tax from their Canadian taxes.
7. **The Parliament of Canada should officially recognize the CRPP as representative of the elected Parliament of Burma.**
8. The Ministers of DFAIT and CIDA should **create the necessary framework to enable CIDA to support capacity-building activities** with Burma's democratic movement.
9. Representatives of **CIDA, DFAIT and Canadian NGOs should meet as soon as possible to discuss a capacity-building framework and strategy to support Burma's democracy movement**
10. In 1999-00, CIDA should designate **planning funds for an NGO coalition to investigate capacity-building needs and modalities of support for the democracy movement.**

Others added to the list the following broad issues that need attention:

11. Enhancement of **multilateral efforts beyond the UN** to influence change, perhaps through the ASEAN, or bilateral relations with Thailand or China.
12. **Assistance to people in war zones** with special attention being paid to women and rape as means to ethnic cleansing.
13. **Assistance to refugees.**
14. Engagement in **"track 2" diplomacy** with the Burmese people, NGOs, and civil society in general.

In response to recognising the NCGUB, Ingrid Hall pointed out that in Canadian foreign policy States are recognised, not governments. The difficulties connected with recognising the Burmese government in exile were expressed by Minister Chan as well. He made known his doubts whether such a recognition would actually enhance the ability of Canada to influence change. However, he also said that it could make a difference if Parliament passed a motion to recognise the NCGUBS first.

Minister Chan also talked about the problems of influencing the Burmese government through the UN where any multilateral effort must be supported by a coalition of states. Lots of international support is needed to get initiatives through the UN.

Ingrid Hall informed the participants of Canada's efforts to influence Burma through ASEAN and Minister Axworthy's initiatives to exclude Burma from Canada-ASEAN Joint Cooperation Committee meetings. Meanwhile, Minister Chan pointed out that despite the positive developments in Thailand, with markets and the government more open and the NGO community more active, the military there still has much influence on politics. The officials from the Thai government must manage bilateral issues with Burma carefully due to the long porous borders between the two countries through which many Burmese refugees come to seek reprieve from repression. A deterioration of relations between the two countries could lead to a potentially explosive situation.

Participants were asked to think about the deteriorating economic and political situation in Burma and whether Canadian initiatives should not be re-directed from the borderlands – where are focussed now, to inside of the country. In response, some participants argued that Canada can influence change only to the degree that people inside Burma move. Furthermore, change will not be possible through political pressure. More indirect means like education, for example, have to be found. Garry Rozema of Burma Relief Centre pointed out that the work done on the borders penetrates into Burma quite effectively. We should not overestimate what we can actually achieve since there is no doubt that the SPDC is aware of most "subversive" foreign activities. Nevertheless, Peter Globensky, Canadian Lutheran World Relief, reminded participants of methods and creative approaches. If funds and political will exists solutions can be found. The South African experience showed that there are ways of helping. Some reacted to this idea with scepticism.

The issue of sanctions and investment bans was also discussed. Pro-arguments mirrored James Myint Swe's rationale while others drew attention to the boundaries of the international legal framework in imposing sanctions and bans. (The topic of sanctions was addressed in some detail during the 1997 Roundtable on Burma, see the annex for more information. The reaction to DFAIT's stated interpretation of the *Special Economic Measures Act*, S.C. 1992.c.17' is also available).

Next the discussion turned to Canada's developmental initiatives on the part of CIDA and

NGOs. Susan Brown from CIDA told the participants about joint CIDA-NGO humanitarian assistance and food aid initiatives in Burma. While the bilateral desk is unable to do anything at the present, a proposal has been drafted to work with the Burmese diaspora in developing a plan for democratic transition based on broad consensus. Another developmental problem facing CIDA and Canadian NGOs is the growing number of internally displaced people. How should we address such an internal issue in the context of sovereign states? How do we address system and mechanism of aid delivery? These questions are complicated since, as some participants pointed out, helping the internally displaced may actually facilitate government led forced relocation efforts. In some cases the Canadian government would end up feeding labour camps set up by the Burmese repressive regime.

Peter Globensky talked about the Canadian Lutheran World Relief peace building initiatives aimed at displacing the SPDC and addressing issues that a potentially new government would have to face. The basis of these initiatives is to build a consensus in the Burmese society among the various ethnic groups and approach reform multilaterally. A potentially new government will have to face a gutted economy, deteriorating infrastructure and wide-spread poverty. The Lutheran World Relief project attempts to prepare to face such a predicament through an inclusive and legitimate process. At present most energy is invested in consolidating the position of the democratic movement. Towards that end, there is an effort to develop consensus of the government in exile and attempt to advance dialogue from there.

Peter Globensky then pointed out the sea change at CIDA in addressing the problems faced by the Burmese people. Some really good projects aimed at improving the access to health and food as well as with refugees have strengthened Canada's credibility. However, as social and physical infrastructures deteriorate, there is a great need for training and education even though some of these peace building activities are already under way, health training (psychology) as well as computer training are just two examples.

There is a need now to coordinate them and create a capacity building framework. This would involve a multilateral efforts on the part of NGOs, European (Euro-Burma office) as well as North American donors that would build on years of experience and could be submitted to CIDA for funding. An "ODAable" framework for Burma should be created so that funds can be allocated. This would involve an agreement of the CIDA and DFAIT Ministers. Moreover, CIDA funding should correspond to the long term attention that capacity building requires, one-year horizon is simply not adequate.

Gary Rozema concluded by saying that the economic and humanitarian problems can only be solved politically. He was sceptical that issues such as HIV, AIDS, and malnutrition can be solved while the current regime is in power.

ANNEX

Three members of the Burmese Students Democratic Organisation, Min San, Htay Aung and Myint Htay, came to deliver a short presentation to the roundtable during lunch. They drove from Vancouver to Ottawa to protest against the arrests, intimidation and coercion of elected members of parliament in Burma and to deliver a petition to the Burmese Ambassador in Ottawa.

The following material is available upon request:

- Bruce Matthews, *Burma/Myanmar: Government a la mode – From SLORC to SPDC: A change of Public Dress-Up and Manner?*
- Press Release by the Burmese Students Democratic Organisation from May 15, 1999
- Craig Forcese, *Memorandum: Reaction to DFAIT's stated interpretation of the Special Economic Measures Act, S.C. 19992.c.17'*
- British Columbia Resolution in Support of Burma's Democracy Movement
- CCFPD, *Report of the 19997 Roundtable on Burma*
- CCFPD, Burma: Creating new Policies and Partnerships: International Conference, Ottawa, 25-26 April, 1998
- Friends of Burma, Canadian NGO Policy Paper on Burma

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